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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to investigate the curricular experiences of the low achievers, including the quality of the programs they participated in and the congruence between their classroom and pullout programs. Three lower-middle-class first graders in the Pacific Northwest participated in the study: John spent the entire day in the classroom; Ginny was pulled out of the classroom 15 minutes daily to receive remedial help in reading comprehension in the Chapter 1 program; and Michael was pulled out of the classroom 25 minutes daily to receive help in reading comprehension and word attack from the special education teacher in a resource room setting. The reading programs implemented for each of the students were investigated primarily through classroom observation, informal conversations with teachers, summaries of journal entries, and children's written work. Portions of the core classroom program were judged to be of poor quality in both student responses and teacher-student interactions. It is likely that this negatively affected the achievement of the at-risk students. The experiences of Ginny and Michael in their respective pullout settings appear to be qualitatively different from their classroom experiences. Text difficulty was controlled by orthographic features rather than by meaning; instruction was teacher-directed rather than learner-controlled; materials were teacher-selected rather than student-selected; expected student responses differed; and student-teacher interactions were sustained longer. (Nineteen references are attached.) (MG)

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The Curricular Experiences of Low Achieving First Graders in a Whole Language Program

A measure of the success of the whole language movement is that journals are now including commentaries by outside observers in addition to testimonials by the movement's leaders and new converts. In an introduction to an entire issue of The Elementary School Journal devoted to whole language, Hoffman (1989) notes that the concept is still far from developed and calls for informed debate and dialogue. Pearson (1989) contributes to the dialogue by identifying both positive aspects of whole language (e.g., the use of integrated curricula and authentic texts) and potential areas of concern (e.g., the teacher's role in instruction). McCaslin (1989) suggests that the task now facing whole language advocates is to critically investigate the issue of implementation. All agree with McCaslin that continued dialogue should be conducted without glibly dismissing alternative conceptions of reading and of research.

In a different climate, the work of Stahl and Miller (1989) might be dismissed out of hand by whole language advocates. These researchers synthesized the results of comparisons between basal reading approaches and whole language or language experience approaches by using meta-analysis and vote-counting procedures. They concluded that the two types of approaches were approximately equivalent in their overall effects on standardized and nonstandardized measures and on measures of both attitude and achievement. However, whole language approaches were found to be more effective at the level of kindergarten or reading readiness than at

first grade when formal reading instruction is introduced. The explanation for this differential effect is that whole language approaches are well-suited to teaching basic print concepts such as directionality but are not sufficiently systematic to assist some children in mastering decoding efficiently. Factors such as assigning tasks that are only indirectly related to reading interfere with efficiency of instruction.

This inefficiency may negatively impact children who are at risk of school failure. As defined by Slavin (1989), "at risk" refers to students whose intelligence is within normal limits but who are failing to achieve the basic skills necessary for success in school and in life. The practical definition includes low achieving students who are eligible for compensatory or special education services. Such students may be served in one of three major types of programs: compensatory or other remedial programs such as Chapter I, special education programs, and general education programs.

Slavin, Madden, and Karweit (1989) have identified several themes common among effective programs for at risk students. First, the quality of the programs that are implemented matter more than the setting in which remedial or special education services are provided. Second, pullout programs are often poorly coordinated with the general education program. Third, effective classroom and pullout programs for at risk students accommodate individual needs while maximizing direct instruction. Fourth, teaching behaviors associated with outstanding achievement gains for students pulled out for special instruction tend to be the same as behaviors that are effective with all students. These behaviors involve active instruction in which the teacher transmits the content of lessons, rather than relying on

worksheets, books, supplemental materials, etc. (Crawford, 1989; Larrivee, 1989).

The issue of program coordination merits elaboration. Consistency between general education and special programs is often referred to as congruence. Walp and Walmsley (1989) identify three types of congruence: procedural, instructional, and philosophical. Instructional incongruence is frequently observed between general education and special programs. Allington and Johnston (1989) report that conflicts arise in several areas. Strategies used to control text difficulty may differ; natural language may govern one program and orthographic regularity the other. The assumed hierarchy of learning may conflict when comprehension of whole text is emphasized in one setting and decoding is emphasized in the other. Instructional strategies may vary, as when learner-directed instruction dominates one setting and teacher-directed dominates the other. These differences often stem from philosophical incongruence, reflecting differences in beliefs about the nature of reading, reading disability, and the roles of teachers and students in instruction.

Few studies have critically examined whole language programs as implemented with at risk, low achieving students. Fewer still have investigated the congruence between whole language classrooms and special services. In an unpublished study, Lindsey (1988) compared an integrated reading and language arts curriculum with a traditional basal curriculum at the primary level. The majority of differences in both the overall comparisons and the separate analyses of low achievers were non-significant. Significant differences in achievement were found to favor first graders in the basal program in word analysis. The purpose of this paper is to better understand the

disappointing results in reading at the first grade level by investigating the curricular experiences of the low achievers. Of interest is the quality of the programs they participated in and the congruence between their classroom and pullout programs.

Method

Subjects

The study was conducted in a lower-middle class community located in the Pacific Northwest during the spring of 1987. The target classroom was a first/second grade combination taught by Mrs. Starr. She was highly regarded in her district as an effective teacher and as an instructional leader. She was enthusiastic about the program she implemented and committed to making it work. She was also particularly interested in its application with low achieving children. She requested to have at risk students assigned to her classroom, and she insisted on reducing the time spent by eligible students in pullout programs.

Three first graders were nominated as low achievers by Mrs. Starr. The three children participated in the full range of service delivery options in the school. John spent the entire instructional day in Mrs. Starr's classroom. Ginny was pulled out of the classroom 15 minutes daily to receive remedial help in reading comprehension in the Chapter I program. Michael was pulled out of the classroom 25 minutes daily to receive help in reading comprehension and word attack from the special education teacher in a resource room setting.

Procedures

The reading programs implemented for John, Ginny, and Michael were investigated primarily through classroom observation. All observations were made by the researcher, who assumed the role of unobtrusive nonparticipant. Informal conversations with teachers, summarized in journal entries, provided additional insight into their experiences. In addition, children's written work was informally examined. Notations about the nature of the task and the quality of students' responses were made.

Each of the three low achievers was observed on a different day. During the day's observation the researcher observed all instructional events that occurred during designated reading periods, in both Mrs. Starr's classroom and pullout programs. A protocol was generated on the basis of continuous observation of the actions of the student.

Data Analysis

The observation notes were reviewed after the completion of the study. Fidelity of program implementation was described by comparing recommendations from program guides with notations relating to instructional events; these comparisons were triangulated with informal conversations with teachers. Student responses were described by comparing notations of students' actions with expected student responses, as outlined in program guides. These comparisons were triangulated with notations relating to informal examinations of student work. Time notations for teacher-student interactions were

classified as lasting 15 seconds or less, 16-30 seconds, 31 seconds to one minutes, two to three minutes, and continuous (sustained interactions lasting more than three minutes).

Materials

Success in Reading and Writing (Success). Success is an integrated reading and language arts instruction program designed for students in kindergarten though sixth grades. Key components include use of students' own language and everyday reading materials, no ability grouping, and daily composition and recreational reading. These characteristics comport with the description of whole language classrooms by Watson (1989).

The instructional program in first grade (Adams, 1978) consists of five modules, each intended to last 30 minutes. Three are of interest in this investigation. What follows is a summary of their intended purposes and expected student responses, along with a description of materials observed in use. The objectives of each are described in the author's own words.

The purpose of the "Phonics/Spelling" module is to teach students the strategies (e.g., sound-symbol associations) necessary to decode with comprehension any word in the language they wish to read. The teacher begins by announcing a focus for the lesson (e.g., "words with sk, two syllables"). Students are expected to individually volunteer words and sentences containing the focal elements (e.g., "basket"; "Tammy went skating"), answer teacher questions about word attack or vocabulary, and orally read the resulting chart in unison. Students then independently copy the chart and/or write their own

sentences containing the focal element. At this time the teacher circulates and asks individuals to orally read their texts and discusses word attack elements. Michael was pulled out of this component for special services; charts produced during observations of John and Ginny illustrate the typical text produced by the group:

"Singing is fun," said S_____.
The movie had a happy ending.
Cindi Lauper is a singer.
B_____ is mending her sock.
The movie just ended.
I am ready.

My uncle is funny.
K_____ is funny.
You are running.
People are digging under the dirt.
"Clowns are running," said K_____.
On Sunday I go to my friend's house and give his uncle underdogs on the swing.

The purpose of the "Recreational Reading" module is to establish student reading for enjoyment and information through uninterrupted, unrestricted, silent reading from a variety of fiction and nonfiction library-type books. Students are expected to select and silently read printed text from materials available in the classroom. During a representative observation of Ginny, students selected class books, comic books (e.g. "Yosemite Sam"), basal readers, magazines (e.g., National Geographic), informational books (e.g., Life in Ponds and Streams), and story books (e.g., Stone Soup). The program also recommends that teachers schedule approximately six conferences per day with individual students, cycling through everyone in the class at least once a week. The focus of the conferences at the first grade level is initially on word

attack skills; later the conferences are to involve "sharing" of the books that the student and teacher are each reading.

"Patterning", a module designed to last the first half of the school year, is intended primarily to emphasize identical letter combination patterns in various positions in words. The strategy for obtaining instructional material is the same as in "Phonics/Spelling", with the exception that students generate only words, not sentences. At the time of the study, this module had been completed and was replaced with an alternative reading activity. The time slot is intended by the program author to be used to extend the recreational reading module another 30 minutes.

Pullout Programs. Instructional materials and methods varied from child to child. Ginny was expected to read words and sentences orally, mark worksheet answers, and answer the teachers questions. Four comprehension worksheets (focusing on the skills of identifying rhyming words, locating details, making inferences, and visual discrimination of phrases) from the district's adopted basal series were utilized. Michael was expected to orally blend consonant+/a/ with final consonants, sound out phonetically regular cvc /a/ words, pronounce sight words, and read passages containing words with /d/. Materials included worksheets and passages taken from phonetically-controlled supplemental programs and teacher-made flashcards.

Results

Fidelity of Implementation

Mrs. Starr was faithful in her implementation of the "Phonics/Spelling" module. The two remaining components were substantially altered.

Recreational Reading. Mrs. Starr modified the module to eliminate recommended conferences because she believed that children's silent reading should not be interrupted by any "distraction", including interactions with the teacher. The single academic interaction observed during this module was initiated by the student.

Patterning. This component was not replaced by extending "Recreational Reading" another 30 minutes, as recommended. Instead, Mrs. Starr established small, homogeneous reading groups and placed them into the district adopted basal program. She reported doing so for two reasons. First, the district had mandated that the Success teachers administer the basal unit tests as a measure of program effectiveness, and Mrs. Starr felt that students needed experience with basal instructional tasks in order to perform successfully on basal tests. Second, she wanted students to be familiar with basal instruction in case students were placed in classrooms using basal approaches rather than Success the following year.

Groups worked under her direction in very typical basal procedures. John, for example, worked with one other student; they took turns reading word lists and passages orally and answering literal and inferential questions. Because only 30 minutes was available for basal instruction, students did not participate in teacher-directed groups on a daily basis. When not in groups, students were expected to read in a basal reader independently or to complete worksheet assignments. The only difference from traditional basal procedures was that students were free to select any of the

basal readers available in the classroom, which included several grade levels from several different programs. Michael, for example, completed the Weekly Reader written activity and a short vowel ditto, then read out of his own level of the district adopted basal reader. Ginny, who was pulled out of this activity for 15 minutes, returned from Chapter I, selected readers from two different programs, and read them silently for the remainder of the period.

Student Responses

The three low performers generally tried to do what was expected of them, particularly in the basal replacement for "Patterning" and in their pullout programs. Patterns of deviations from expectations were observed in two major Success modules, however.

Phonics/Spelling. Deviations by the two students who participated in this module, John and Ginny, could be found in two of the expected behaviors. Students were expected to volunteer examples of the focal element, though the level of expectation was not high. Mrs. Starr encouraged and praised contributions but did not hold individuals accountable if they chose not to volunteer. Ginny did not attempt to contribute; John raised his hand to volunteer a word only once, in a tentative manner, and he quickly lowered his hand before the teacher noticed that it had been raised.

During the independent seatwork task, Success students had the option of generating their own sentences rather than copying the chart. The level of expectation for choosing to generate novel sentences was not high; Mrs. Starr did not respond negatively to students who chose to copy. Neither Ginny nor John was observed to

generate novel text.

Recreational Reading. Students were expected to silently read text. Only Ginny engaged in actual reading of text; the other two turned pages rapidly and appeared to look at pictures rather than process text. John and Michael had difficulty sustaining even this limited type of interaction with books over the entire period. Both were frequently engaged in other behaviors such as talking to neighbors and walking around the room. In one telling incident, John was observed to turn pages while his head was turned away from the book.

Teacher-Student Interactions

Success. During the two Success modules, individual contacts that were for academic purposes tended to be both infrequent and brief in duration.

John had three interactions. Of these, two involved reading sentences orally during "Phonics/Spelling"; one interaction lasted 15 seconds or less, the other lasted one minute. The teacher responded by announcing the next task in one instance and praising him in the other. A final contact, lasting 15 seconds or less, was initiated by John during "Recreational Reading". He showed the teacher a word containing a suffix in his library book; corrective feedback was provided.

Ginny's three interactions occurred during "Phonics/Spelling". Each lasted 15 seconds or less and involved reading a sentence orally. The teacher responded to each with praise.

Michael was pulled out of "Phonics/Spelling" for special

services. Neither he nor Ginny had any academic interactions with the teacher during "Recreational Reading".

Basal Group. John's experience in the teacher-directed small group activity lasted 17 minutes and consisted of continuous interactions among the teacher and the two students. There were high rates of successful student responding with immediate feedback.

During the "free reading" activity of the basal period, Ginny sought and received teacher assistance in pronouncing a word on two occasions. Each interaction lasted 15 seconds or less.

Michael had three academic interactions with the teacher during the "free reading" activity, all initiated by Mrs. Starr, and all with the intent of instructing rather than monitoring. In the briefest interaction, lasting one minute, the teacher reviewed short i and short e vowel sounds and provided guided practice. The two longer ones (2-3 minutes) involved identifying words in his self-chosen basal reader and sequencing events in the story; in these instances the teacher worked simultaneously with another student who was reading the same book. She provided both input and corrective feedback.

Special Services. Both Ginny and Michael worked with an adult on an individual basis, Ginny for ten minutes and Michael for 24 minutes. This time was observed to involve intensive, continuous interactions between teacher and student, with high levels of student responding paired with teacher feedback or explanation.

Discussion

Quality of the Classroom Curriculum

Portions of the core classroom program are judged to be of poor quality in both student responses and teacher-student interactions. It is likely that this negatively affected the achievement of the at risk students.

Student Responses. The student response that is most problematic in Success is generating examples of the focal element. The rationale for this type of student-generated text is that vocabulary derived from students' own oral language is more meaningful. However, it is hard to argue that the resulting text ("My uncle is funny", etc.) is qualitatively superior to current basal reader passages. The sentences are not connected in meaning; as a result, they violate tacit expectations for text structure. Further, the task of generating examples of the focal element is both contrived and difficult. It is substantially more difficult than either decoding the same words generated by another author or generating a message of the individual's own choosing, without constraint.

A second student response that may have negatively affected student achievement is copying. The common criticism of basal programs is their excessive and inappropriate reliance on repetitive, meaningless worksheet tasks. Yet copying requires even less cognitive effort than completing matching or fill-in-the-blank exercises on worksheets. Copying neither guarantees that students think about the decoding and encoding elements of the text, nor entails purposeful, student-initiated communication with others.

A third problematic response is silent reading. One characteristic of the differential instruction typically provided to low performers in basal programs is the emphasis on oral reading at the expense of silent reading (Allington, 1983; Hiebert, 1983).

Success appears to avoid this in allocating 30 minutes of daily silent reading. Further, Mrs. Starr went to considerable lengths to provide a variety of appealing materials, including an abundance of excellent children's literature. Yet two of the three low achievers had significant difficulty actually processing text.

One factor contributing to the low text processing is the practice of allowing students to choose whatever they wished to read. While this may positively affect student attitudes toward reading, it may also result in a poor match between the demands of the text and the very limited decoding skills of these beginning readers. A more important factor is Mrs. Starr's decision to eliminate individual conferences. Conferences were her sole opportunity to systematically guide students in decoding and comprehending connected text written by mature authors. Eliminating them reduced her access to the type of information that would enable her to judge the match between student and text and to facilitate text processing. This is especially alarming because two of the three children received special services <u>because of</u> their problems in comprehension.

"Recreational Reading" is an example of individualized instruction, in the sense that the use of different materials is thought to permit each student to progress at a pace suited to his or her abilities and interests. This instructional approach, as actually implemented, has been criticized because it tends to shift responsibility away from the teacher (Good & Brophy, 1987). The responsibility for teaching is shifted from the teacher to the student, and the responsibility for delivering content is shifted from the teacher to the instructional materials. At risk students, particularly at the first grade level, may not be able to

independently assume this responsibility.

In sum, copying and generating novel text are qualitatively poor tasks. They fail to provide direct opportunities to engage in meaningful reading and writing. Silent reading, on the other hand, isn't inherently poor; but without teacher involvement, actual student responses may result in marginal experiences in literacy development. All three responses are inefficient because students expend a significant amount of time in performing tasks that do not directly relate to the desired student outcomes.

Teacher-Student Interactions. A major feature of Success is that the teacher is able to work with students on a one-to-one basis following whole group instruction. These portions of the program are not intended to be merely for students to practice reading independently of the teacher. Rather, their purpose is to enable the teacher to address individual needs through review and instruction. Interactions are intended to be more on the order of "mini-conferences" than the typical monitoring activities of teachers using basal programs.

Yet, as implemented, teacher-student interactions that were for academic purposes were infrequent, brief, and entailed only incidental responses to a particular task at hand. Sustained interactions (2-3 minutes or longer) occurred in Mrs. Starr's classroom only in the context of the basal replacement, not in Success. The basal interactions contrast with Success both in length and in the teacher's use of the interaction to demonstrate and to explain, as well as to monitor and provide feedback. It is unlikely that the individual student contacts in Success modules were adequate for systematically tracking and accommodating the special needs of at

risk students. This suggests that a key area for continued investigation is the quantity and quality of individual teacher-student interactions in whole language programs.

While these responses and interactions may be unique to Success and would be eschewed by most whole language proponents, they underscore two related points. First, as we investigate whole language approaches to beginning reading instruction, we must critically evaluate the nature of student responses--both expected and, especially, actual. Not all that passes under the name of an approach to instruction is necessarily of value. Second, we must look beyond the mere presence of particular types of instructional materials. We must examine whether and how teachers assist students in using the materials in appropriate, meaningful ways.

Congruence between Pullout and Classroom Programs

The experiences of Ginny and Michael in their respective pullout settings appear to be qualitatively different from their Success classroom experiences. Text difficulty was controlled by orthographic features rather than by meaning; instruction was teacher-directed rather than learner-controlled; materials were teacher-selected rather than student-selected or student-generated; expected student responses differed; student-teacher interactions were sustained longer.

Two points can be made about this incongruence. First, the core curricula of the pullout programs were not qualitatively inferior on every point of comparison. For example, while the instructional materials did not provide the same quality of narrative text that

library books might, the teacher guidance resulted in greater depth of processing than occurred in Success. The highly interactive instruction that is characteristic of effective practices for at risk children seems a more critical factor than availability of instructional materials alone. Before pullout programs can be made to be consistent with classroom whole language programs, it is necessary first to ensure that the classroom practices are qualitatively justifiable.

Second, the apparent incompatibility in methods and materials for Success low achievers is not limited to those who participate in pullout programs. Although he received no special services, John's experience in the classroom basal activity resembled Ginny's and Michael's experiences in their special services more than it did his other experiences in the classroom. Thus any incompatibility between curricula was experienced <u>within</u> the Success classroom as well as <u>between</u> the Success classroom and the pullout programs.

The decision to establish a basal reading activity on the surface appears defensible in terms of the pragmatics of running classrooms, the politics of innovative change, and the effective instructional practice of overlapping curriculum with test content (Crawford, 1989). The irony is that Mrs. Starr had adopted Success because she rejected basals philosophically. In retrospect, it seems possible that Mrs. Starr implemented an activity that was incongruent with the rest of her program because she herself had not yet achieved a coherent philosophy.

Evidence for this speculation comes from her decision to eliminate conferences from the "Recreational Reading" module. This appears to emanate from a belief that the student, rather than the

teacher, ought to initiate and direct learning. This view is consistent with the notion of empowering students, popular among advocates of whole language--though the idea that empowering students requires the teacher to be powerless is not. Whole language teachers view themselves as being actively involved in organizing the environment so that learning occurs. A primary strategy both for facilitating learning and for evaluating the quality of learning is through interaction with individual students (Goodman, 1989). Thus for Mrs. Starr to have given up interactions suggests that she had not fully conceptualized how to facilitate learning without directly transmitting skill-specific knowledge.

If this speculation is verified, it suggests that achieving philosophical congruence is an issue for the individual classroom teacher as well as for the several teachers who must collaborate in serving children. A philosophy is the possession of the individual rather than the program she implements; it is not necessarily coherent, fixed, or well-articulated. As research in whole language classrooms continues, attention should be paid to teacher belief systems, for it is the teacher's interpretation of the curriculum rather than the curriculum itself that is presented to students (Brophy, 1982; Schmidt & Buchmann, 1983). We should inquire into the teacher's philosophy of reading, of reading disability, and of the roles of teachers and students in learning.

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